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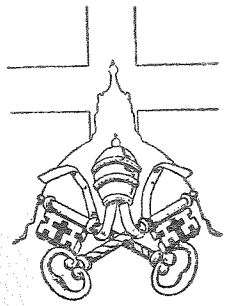
ENCYCLICAL LETTER
of
POPE PIUS XI
on
MOTION PICTURES



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ENCYCLICAL LETTER
of
POPE PIUS XI
on
MOTION PICTURES

To Our Venerable Brethren, the Archbishops and Bishops of the United States of America, and to Other Ordinaries Enjoying Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See

Venerable Brethren, Greetings and Apostolic Benediction

In following with vigilant eye, as Our Pastoral Office requires, the beneficent work of Our Brethren in the Episcopate and of the faithful, it has been highly pleasing to Us to learn of the fruits already gathered and of the progress which continues to be made by that prudent initiative launched more than two years ago as a holy crusade against the abuses of the motion pictures and entrusted in a special manner to the "Legion of Decency."

This excellent experiment now offers Us a most welcome opportunity of manifesting more fully Our thought in regard to a matter which touches intimately the moral and religious life of the entire Christian people.

First of all, We express Our gratitude to the Hierarchy of the United States of America and to the faithful who cooperated with them, for the important results already achieved, under their direction and guidance, by the "Legion of Decency." And Our gratitude is all the livelier for

the fact that We were deeply anguished to note with each passing day the lamentable progress — *magni passus extra viam* — of the motion picture art and industry in the portrayal of sin and vice.

As often as the occasion has presented itself, We have considered it the duty of Our high Office to direct to this condition the attention not only of the Episcopate and the Clergy but also of all men who are right-minded and solicitous for the public weal.

In the Encyclical "Divini illius Magistri," We had already deplored that "potent instrumentalities of publicity (such as the cinema) which might be of great advantage to learning and to education were they properly directed by healthy principles, often unfortunately serve as an incentive to evil passions and are subordinated to sordid gain."[1]

Renewed Proof of Apostolic Solicitude

In August 1934, addressing Ourselves to a delegation of the International Federation of the Motion Picture Press, We pointed out the very great importance which the motion picture has acquired in our days and its vast influence alike in the promotion of good and in the insinuation of evil, and We called to mind that it is necessary to apply to the cinema the supreme rule which must direct and regulate the great gift of art in order that it may not find itself in continual conflict with Christian morality or even with simply human morality based upon the natural law. The essential purpose of art, its raison d'etre, is to assist in the perfection of the moral personality, which is man, and for

[1] A. A. S., 1930, vol. XXII, page 82.

this reason it must itself be moral. And We concluded amid the manifest approval of that elect body — the memory is still dear to Us — by recommending to them the necessity of making the motion picture "moral, an influence for good morals, an educator."

And even recently, in April of this year, when We had the happiness of receiving in audience a group of delegates to the International Congress of the Motion Picture Press, held at Rome, We again drew attention to the gravity of the problem and We warmly exhorted all men of good will, in the name not only of religion but also of the true moral and civil welfare of the people, to use every means in their power, such as the Press, to make of the cinema a valuable auxiliary of instruction and education rather than of destruction and ruin of souls.

The subject, however, is of such paramount importance in itself and because of the present condition of society that We deem it necessary to return to it again not alone for the purpose of making particular recommendations as on past occasions but rather with a universal outlook which, while embracing the needs of your own Dioceses, Venerable Brethren, takes into consideration those of the entire Catholic world.

It is, in fact, urgently necessary to make provision that in this field also the progress of the arts, of the sciences and of human technique and industry, since they are all true gifts of God, may be ordained to His glory and to the salvation of souls and may be made to serve in a practical way to promote the extension of the Kingdom of God upon earth. Thus, as the Church bids us pray, we may all profit by them but in such a manner as not to lose the goods

eternal: *"sic transeamus per bona temporalia ut non amittamus aeterna."*[2]

Now then, it is a certainty which can readily be verified that the more marvellous the progress of the motion picture art and industry, the more pernicious and deadly has it shown itself to morality and to religion and even to the very decencies of human society.

Praiseworthy Work of American Bishops

The directors of the industry in the United States recognized this fact themselves when they confessed that the responsibility before the people and the world was their very own. In an agreement entered into by common accord in March 1930 and solemnly sealed, signed and published in the press, they formally pledged themselves to safeguard for the furture the moral welfare of the patrons of the cinema.

It is promised in this agreement that no film which lowers the moral standard of the spectators, which casts discredit upon natural or human law or arouses sympathy for their violation will be produced.

Nevertheless, in spite of this wise and spontaneously taken decision, those responsible showed themselves incapable of carrying it into effect and it appeared that the operators were not disposed to stand by the principles to which they had obligated themselves. Since, therefore, the above-mentioned undertaking proved to have but slight effect and since the parade of vice and crime continued on the screen, the road seemed almost closed to those who sought honest diversion in the motion picture.

[2]Oration of the Mass of the Third Sunday after Pentecost.

In this crisis, You, Venerable Brethren, were among the first to study the means of safeguarding the souls entrusted to your care, and you launched the "Legion of Decency" as a crusade for public morality designed to revitalize the ideals of natural and Christian rectitude. Far from you was the thought of doing damage to the motion picture industry; rather indeed did you arm it beforehand against the ruin which menaces every form of recreation which, in the guise of art, degenerates into corruption.

Your leadership called forth the prompt and devoted loyalty of your faithful people and millions of American Catholics signed the pledge of the "Legion of Decency" binding themselves not to attend any motion picture which was offensive to Catholic moral principles or proper standards of living. We are thus able to proclaim joyfully that few problems of these latter times have so closely united Bishops and people as the one resolved by cooperation in this holy crusade. Not only Catholics but also high minded Protestants, Jews and many others accepted your lead and joined their efforts with yours in restoring wise standards, both artistic and moral, to the cinema.

It is an exceedingly great comfort to Us to note the outstanding success of the crusade. Because of your vigilance and because of the pressure which has been brought to bear by public opinion, the motion picture has shown an improvement from the moral standpoint: crime and vice are portrayed less frequently; sin is no longer so openly approved and acclaimed; false ideals of life are no longer presented in so flagrant a manner to the impressionable minds of youth.

Success of a Holy Crusade

Although in certain quarters it was predicted that the artistic values of the motion picture would be seriously impaired by the reform insisted upon by the "Legion of Decency", it appears that quite the contrary has happened and that the "Legion of Decency" has given no little impetus to the efforts to advance the cinema on the road to noble artistic significance by directing it towards the production of classic masterpieces as well as of original creations of uncommon worth.

Nor have the financial investments of the industry suffered, as was gratuitously foretold, for many of those who stayed away from the motion picture theatre because it outraged morality are patronizing it now that they are able to enjoy clean films which are not offensive to good morals or dangerous to Christian virtue.

When you started your crusade, it was said that your efforts would be of short duration and that the effects would not be lasting because as the vigilance of Bishops and faithful gradually diminished, the producers would be free to return again to their former methods. It is not difficult to understand why certain of these might be desirous of going back to the sinister themes which pander to base desires and which you had proscribed. While the representation of subjects of real artistic value and the portrayal of the vicissitudes of human virtue require intellectual effort, toil, ability and at times considerable outlay of money, it is often relatively easy to attract a certain type of person and certain classes of people to a theatre which presents picture plays calculated to inflame the passions and to arouse the lower instincts latent in the human heart.

An unceasing and universal vigilance must, on the contrary, convince the producers that the "Legion of Decency" has not been started as a crusade of short duration, soon to be neglected and forgotten, but that the Bishops of the United States are determined, at all times and at all costs, to safeguard the recreation of the people whatever form that recreation may take.

Recreation, in its manifold varieties, has become a necessity for people who work under the fatiguing conditions of modern industry but it must be worthy of the rational nature of men and therefore must be morally healthy. It must be elevated to the rank of a positive factor for good and must seek to arouse noble sentiments. A people who, in time of repose, give themselves to diversions which violate decency, honor or morality, to recreations which, especially to the young, constitute occasions of sin, are in grave danger of losing their greatness and even their national power.

Importance and Power of Motion Pictures

It admits of no discussion that the motion picture has achieved these last years a position of universal importance among modern means of diversion.

There is no need to point out the fact that millions of people go to the motion pictures every day; that motion picture theatres are being opened in ever increasing number in civilized and semi-civilized countries; that the motion picture has become the most popular form of diversion which is offered for the leisure moment not only of the rich but of all classes of society.

At the same time, there does not exist today a means of influencing the masses more potent than the cinema. The reason for this is to be sought for in the very nature of the pictures projected upon the screen, in the popularity of motion picture plays and in the circumstance which accompany them.

The power of the motion picture consists in this, that it speaks by means of vivid and concrete imagery which the mind takes in with enjoyment and without fatigue. Even the crudest and most primitive minds which have neither the capacity nor the desire to make the efforts necessary for abstraction or deductive reasoning are captivated by the cinema. In place of the effort which reading or listening demands, there is the continued pleasure of a succession of concrete and, so to speak, living pictures.

This power is still greater in the talking picture for the reason that interpretation becomes even easier and the charm of music is added to the action of the drama. Dances and variety acts which are sometimes introduced between the films serve to increase the stimulation of the passions.

Since then the cinema is in reality a sort of object lesson which, for good or for evil, teaches the majority of men more effectively than abstract reasoning, it must be elevated to conformity with the aims of a Christian conscience and saved from depraving and demoralizing effects.

Everyone knows what damage is done to the soul by bad motion pictures. They are occasions of sin; they seduce young people along the ways of evil by glorifying the passions; they show life under a false light; they cloud ideals; they destroy pure love, respect for marriage, affection for the family. They are capable also of creating prejudices

among individuals and misunderstandings among nations, among social classes, among entire races.

On the other hand, good motion pictures are capable of exercising a profoundly moral influence upon those who see them. In addition to affording recreation, they are able to arouse noble ideals of life, to communicate valuable conceptions, to impart a better knowledge of the history and of the beauties of the Fatherland and of other countries, to present truth and virtue under attractive forms, to create, or at least, to favor understanding among nations, social classes and races, to champion the cause of justice, to give new life to the claims of virtue and to contribute positively to the genesis of a just social order in the world.

These considerations take on greater seriousness from the fact that the cinema speaks not to individuals but to multitudes and that it does so in circumstances of time and place and surroundings which are most apt to arouse unusual enthusiasm for the good as well as for the bad and to conduce to that collective exaltation which, as experience teaches us, may assume the most morbid forms.

The motion picture is viewed by people who are seated in a dark theatre and whose faculties, mental, physical and often spiritual, are relaxed. One does not need to go far in search of these theatres: they are close to the home, to the Church and to the school and they thus bring the cinema into the very center of popular life.

Moreover the acting out of the plot is done by men and women selected for their artistic ability and for all those natural gifts and the employment of those expedients which can become, for youth particularly, instruments of seduction. Further, the motion picture has enlisted in its service

luxurious appointments, pleasing music, the vigor of realism, every form of whim and fancy. For this very reason, it attracts and fascinates particularly the young, the adolescent and even the child. Thus at the very age when the moral sense is being formed and when the notions and sentiments of justice and rectitude, of duty and obligation and of ideals of life are being developed, the motion picture with its direct propaganda assumes a position of commanding influence.

It is unfortunate that, in the present state of affairs, this influence is frequently exerted for evil. So much so that when one thinks of the havoc wrought in the souls of youth and of childhood, of the loss of innocence so often suffered in the motion picture theatres, there comes to mind the terrible condemnation pronounced by Our Lord upon the corruptors of little ones: *"whosoever shall scandalize one of these little ones who believe in Me, it were better for him that a mill stone be hanged about his neck and that he be drowned in the depths of the sea."*

Necessary Vigilance

It is therefore one of the supreme necessities of our times to watch and to labor to the end that the motion picture be no longer a school of corruption but that it be transformed into an effectual instrument for the education and the elevation of mankind.

And here We record with pleasure that certain governments, in their anxiety for the influence exercised by the cinema in the moral and educational fields, have, with the aid of upright and honest persons, especially fathers and

mothers of families, set up reviewing commissions and have constituted other agencies which have to do with motion picture production in an effort to direct the cinema for inspiration to the national works of great poets and writers.

It was most fitting and desirable that you, Venerable Brethren, should have exercised a special watchfulness over the motion picture industry which in your country is so highly developed and which has great influence in other quarters of the globe. It is equally the duty of the Bishops of the entire Catholic world to unite in vigilance over this universal and potent form of entertainment and instruction to the end that they may be able to place a ban on bad motion pictures because they are an offense to the moral and religious sentiments and because they are in opposition to the Christian spirit and to its ethical principles. There must be no weariness in combatting whatever contributes to the lessening of the people's sense of decency and of honor.

This is an obligation which binds not only the Bishops but also the faithful and all decent men who are solicitous for the decorum and moral health of the family, of the nation and of human society in general.

In what, then, must this vigilance consist?

The problem of the production of moral films would be solved radically if it were possible for us to have production wholly inspired by the principles of Christian morality. We can never sufficiently praise all those who have dedicated themselves or who are to dedicate themselves to the noble cause of raising the standard of the motion picture to meet the needs of education and the requirements of the Christian conscience. For this purpose, they must make

full use of the technical ability of experts and not permit the waste of effort and of money by the employment of amateurs.

But since We know how difficult it is to organize such an industry, especially because of considerations of a financial nature, and since on the other hand it is necessary to influence the production of all films so that they may contain nothing harmful from a religious, moral or social viewpoint, Pastors of souls must exercise their vigilance over films wherever they may be produced and offered to the Christian people.

Efficacious Catholic Activity

As to the motion picture industry itself, We exhort the Bishops of all countries, but in particular you, Venerable Brethren, to address an appeal to those Catholics who hold important positions in this industry. Let them take serious thought of their duties and of the responsibility which they have as children of the Church to use their influence and authority for the promotion of principles of sound morality in the films which they produce or aid in producing. The number of Catholics who are executives, directors, authors or actors is not inconsiderable, and it is unfortunate that their influence has not always been in accordance with their Faith and with their ideals. You will do well, Venerable Brethren, to pledge them to bring their profession into harmony with their conscience as respectable men and followers of Jesus Christ.

In this as in every other field of the apostolate, Pastors of souls will surely find their best co-laborers in those who

fight in the ranks of Catholic Action and in this letter We cannot refrain from addressing to them a warm appeal that they give to this cause their full contribution and their unwearying and unfailing activity.

From time to time, the Bishops will do well to recall to the motion picture industry that, amid the cares of their pastoral ministry, they are under obligation to interest themselves in every form of decent and healthy recreation because they are responsible before God for the moral welfare of their people even during their time of leisure.

Their sacred calling constrains them to proclaim clearly and openly that unhealthy and impure entertainment destroys the moral fibre of a nation. They will likewise remind the motion picture industry that the demands which they make regard not only the Catholics but all who patronize the cinema.

In particular, You, Venerable Brethren of the United States, will be able to insist with justice that the industry of your country has recognized and accepted its responsibility before society.

The Bishops of the whole world will take care to make clear to the leaders of the motion picture industry that a force of such power and universality as the cinema can be directed, with great utility, to the highest ends of individual and social improvement. Why indeed should there be question merely of avoiding what is evil? The motion picture should not be simply a means of diversion, a light relaxation to occupy an idle hour; with its magnificent power, it can and must be a bearer of light and a positive guide to what is good.

Precious Directives

And now, in view of the gravity of the subject, We consider it timely to come down to certain practical indications.

Above all, all Pastors of souls will undertake to obtain each year from their people a pledge similar to the one already alluded to which is given by their American brothers and in which they promise to stay away from motion picture plays which are offensive to truth and to Christian morality.

The most efficacious manner of obtaining these pledges or promises is through the parish Church or school and by enlisting the earnest cooperation of all fathers and mothers of families who are conscious of their grave responsibilities.

The Bishops will also be able to avail themselves of the Catholic Press for the purpose of bringing home to the people the moral beauty and the effectiveness of this promise.

The fulfillment of this pledge supposes that the people be told plainly which films are permitted to all, which are permitted with reservations and which are harmful or positively bad. This requires the prompt, regular and frequent publication of classified lists of motion picture plays so as to make the information readily accessible to all. Special bulletins or other timely publications, such as the daily Catholic press, may be used for this purpose.

Were it possible, it would in itself be desirable to establish a single list for the entire world because all live under the same moral law. Since however there is here question of pictures which interest all classes of society, the great and the humble, the learned and the unlettered, the judg-

ment passed upon a film cannot be the same in each case and in all respects. Indeed circumstances, usages and forms vary from country to country so that it does not seem practical to have a single list for all the world. If however films were classified in each country in the manner indicated above, the resultant list would offer in principle the guidance needed.

Therefore, it will be necessary that in each country the Bishops set up a permanent national reviewing office in order to be able to promote good motion pictures, classify the others and bring this judgment to the knowledge of priests and faithful. It will be very proper to entrust this agency to the central organization of Catholic Action which is dependent on the Bishops. At all events, it must be clearly laid down that this service of information, in order to function organically and with efficiency, must be on a national basis and that it must be carried on by a single center of responsibility. Should grave reasons really require it, Their Excellencies the Bishops, in their own Dioceses and through their diocesan reviewing committees, will be able to apply to the national list — which must use standards adaptable to the whole nation — such severer criterions as may be demanded by the character of the region and they may even censor films which were admitted to the general list.

The above-mentioned Office will likewise look after the organization of existing motion picture theatres belonging to parishes and to Catholic associations so that they may be guaranteed reviewed and approved films. Through the organization of these halls, which will often represent a considerable clientele for the industry, it will be possible

to advance a new claim, namely that the industry produce motion pictures which correspond entirely to our principles. Such films may then readily be shown not only in the Catholic halls but also in others.

We realize that the establishment of such an Office will involve a certain sacrifice, a certain expense for Catholics of the various countries. Yet the great importance of the motion picture and the necessity of safeguarding the morality of the Christian people and of the entire nation makes this sacrifice more than justified. Indeed the effectiveness of our schools, of our Catholic associations and even of our churches is lessened and endangered by the plague of evil and pernicious motion pictures.

The Office force must be composed of persons who are familiar with the technique of the motion picture and who are, at the same time, well grounded in the principles of Catholic morality and doctrine. They must, in addition, be under the guidance and the direct supervision of a priest chosen by the Bishops.

For Noble Ideals and Right Norms of Life

Opportune understandings or exchanges of information among the Offices of the various countries will conduce to greater efficiency and harmony in the work of reviewing films while due consideration will be given to varying conditions and circumstances. It will thus be possible to achieve unity of outlook in the judgments and in the communications appearing in the Catholic press of the world.

These Offices will profit not only by the experiments made in the United States but also by the accomplishments of Catholics of other countries in the motion picture field.

Even if employees of the Office – with the best of good will and intentions – should make an occasional mistake, as happens in all human affairs, the Bishops, in their pastoral prudence, will know how to apply effective remedies and to safeguard in every possible way the authority and prestige of the Office itself. This may be done by strengthening the staff with more influential men or by replacing those who have shown themselves less capable of performing their delicate duties.

If the Bishops of the world assume their share in the exercise of this painstaking vigilance over the motion picture – and of this, We who know their pastoral zeal have no doubt – they will certainly accomplish a great work for the protection of the morality of their people during their moments of leisure and recreation. They will win the approbation and the approval of all right thinking men, Catholic and non-Catholic, and they will help to assure that a great international force – the motion picture – shall be directed towards the noble end of promoting the highest ideals and the truest standards of life.

That these desires which well up in Our paternal heart may be realized, We implore the help of the grace of God and in pledge thereof, We impart to you, Venerable Brethren, and to the Clergy and people entrusted to you, Our affectionate Apostolic Benediction.

Given at Rome, from St. Peter's, the 29th day of June, Feast of SS. Peter and Paul, in the year of Our Lord 1936, the 15th year of Our Pontificate.

PIUS PP. XI